



King's Research Portal

DOI:

[10.1111/criq.12250](https://doi.org/10.1111/criq.12250)

Document Version

Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication record in King's Research Portal](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Galt, R. (2016). Down Terrace's duplicitous geographies. *CRITICAL QUARTERLY*, 58(1), 23-28.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/criq.12250>

Citing this paper

Please note that where the full-text provided on King's Research Portal is the Author Accepted Manuscript or Post-Print version this may differ from the final Published version. If citing, it is advised that you check and use the publisher's definitive version for pagination, volume/issue, and date of publication details. And where the final published version is provided on the Research Portal, if citing you are again advised to check the publisher's website for any subsequent corrections.

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the Research Portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognize and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the Research Portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the Research Portal

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact librarypure@kcl.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Down Terrace's Duplicitous Geographies
Rosalind Galt

Ben Wheatley is by now well known for his genre hybridity, mixing British realism with gangster, horror and serial killer elements as well as black comedy. In this regard, his first feature *Down Terrace* (2009) might function merely as an interesting calling card, initiating a style that he would develop in more sophisticated ways in films like *Sightseers* (2012) and *A Field in England* (2013). But it's worth looking more closely at this early work as it is here that we first see Wheatley's careful interlacing of (spectacular) generic style and (realist) physical place. Violence is what overthrows genre expectations and for this most English of contemporary filmmakers, where these violences happen matters. What distinguishes *Down Terrace* is the deployment of the family as the perspective from which both a culturally meaningful location and its equally embedded perversions can best be rendered visible. Thus, in a kind of ironic realism, *Down Terrace* was shot in the actual house where Robert Hill, the actor who plays Bill, lives. Moreover, Robin Hill, who plays his fictional son Karl is also his real-life son and was brought up in that same house. In a practical reading, this rather incestuous mode of production is a hallmark of a cheaply-made first feature, but this choice of casting and location also insists on the signficatory value of both familial relations and domestic architecture. *Down Terrace* banks on the possibility of affective seepage from the human and environmental familiarities of performance to the queasy intimacy of the perverse family onscreen.

The gangster film often sees the family as a site of sentimentality which contrasts with a violence that is aimed outward, at strangers. This effect is all the more notable in the British gangster tradition, in which the hardened Cockney criminal nonetheless, as the cliché has it, 'loves his old mum.' The popular appeal of

figures like the Krays, for example—most recently seen in *Legend* (Helgeland, 2015)—relies on this apparent tension between violent crime and traditional family values. *Down Terrace* gleefully upends this account of the crime family, in a slow-burning story of a gangster family that teeters on a quotidian edge of violence for some days before spectacularly imploding. The film opens with father Bill and son Karl returning triumphantly from the law courts, having been acquitted for an unnamed crime. The loosely-organised narrative turns on the attempts of Bill and matriarch Maggie to figure out who has shopped them to the police, while, in a subplot, Karl's ambiguously ex-girlfriend Valda announces she is pregnant with Karl's baby. Across both plotlines, Karl becomes increasingly unstable and by the end of the film six of their associates are dead, and, in its climactic scenes, Karl and Valda murder Bill and Maggie. In *Down Terrace*, the nuclear family is not the moral counterweight to the outside world of organised crime but rather the duplicitous source and ultimate object of murderous hatred and rage.

The well-known opening to Freud's 'Family Romances', states that, 'The liberation of an individual, as he grows up, from the authority of his parents is one of the most necessary though one of the most painful results brought about by the course of his development.'¹ Karl is certainly liberated from his parents when he shoots his father repeatedly in the breakfast room and arranges for Valda to stab his mother to death on what is intended as a prospective mother-daughter-in-law bonding day out. But the family romance is more commonly read in literary or cultural terms as the search of the hero for alternative parental figures, fantasies that do the work of reinstating the actual parents at a symbolic level. *Down Terrace* does not engage in this mythic form of narrative, instead violently replacing the two parents with Karl and Valda in a generational power grab that almost entirely lacks an unconscious.

Freud describes ‘the neurotic’s family romance’, in which the child’s growing ability to criticise his parents is reflected back into a sense of the parent’s hostility toward the child.² We might think of *Down Terrace* as proposing the psychotic’s family romance, in which the actual hostility of the parents leads to their bloody excision from the narrative.

David Cox has described Wheatley’s films in terms of their ‘tonally unpredictable narratives’, and this apt term describes an effect that *Down Terrace* routes in the first instance through the emotional unpredictability of the characters themselves, and particularly Karl.³ Presented in the first instance as the softer, gentler member of the clan, it becomes clear that Karl has what his mother euphemistically describes as ‘mood swings’. We are given a brief indication of his aggressively self-hating short fuse in the opening scenes, when he can’t undo the tie he has unwillingly worn for court, and ends up frantically clawing at it, comparing it to a noose, and ultimately needs his mother’s help to remove the offending item. Later, a frustrated outburst at his girlfriend discloses how quickly his weakness can turn threatening. The fast-changing mood of the gangster is an expected generic trait—think of ‘funny how?’ as a shorthand for the febrile uncertainty over what is normative homosocial banter and what is a loss of face to be avenged with violence. But whereas the spectator of more conventional gangster films may occasionally be unsure as to where that line lies for individual characters, *Down Terrace* takes that uncertainty and turns it into a more disconcerting lack of clear grounding in a diegetic world. Karl’s violent temper is played for realist drama in one scene and for black comedy in the next, before lurching back to a kind of sympathy as we witness his mother gaslighting him in a cynically cruel manner. As the film progresses, we are increasingly unclear about the fictional rules of the game: we expect certain kinds of violence in a gangster film

but *Down Terrace* makes its actions both unexpected and disconcerting through a wildly variable emotional temperature.

For example, Bill and Maggie decide that Irish hitman Pringle has to be killed, and his elderly mother too, since she is known to be a loose talker. Bill takes Pringle to a field, where he leads him to a deserted space behind an old caravan. Figuring out what's happening, Pringle makes a run for it, zig-zagging across the open space. Giving him the opportunity to run narratively initiates a chase in which the spectator might expect this rather sympathetic character to escape. Instead, after a wide shot held for just enough time to let the spectator begin to believe he will make it, Pringle is shot and crumples unceremoniously to the grass. Our hopes for a heroic escape are dashed; even mocked. This play with audience expectations and narrative temporality is reversed in the subsequent murder of Mrs Pringle, which plays out in a single shot. The Irishman's mother is waiting at a bus stop when Bill approaches and engages her in small talk. Out of the blue, he pushes her into traffic where she is carried rapidly out of frame on the hood of a passing car. The short scene is breathtaking, shocking, funny. It makes it hard to know how to react, prompting an uncomfortable spectatorial complicity with the film's easy cruelty.

A significant effect of this affective plasticity is a rich critique of precisely those family values that the gangster film often covertly espouses. The first murder takes place when dim family friend Garvey inadvertently suggests to Karl that Valda's baby might not be his. The couple had been apart for several months before her return, but Karl has insisted that he trusts her word on the baby's paternity. Garvey innocently tells Karl that Valda had several other boyfriends in the last months, whom she met in the same way she met Karl—by writing letters to them in prison. Without any visible change in affect, Karl tells Garvey he is planning some

home decoration and asks him to hold up a plastic sheet to the wall. As soon as Garvey does so, he hits him with a hammer. Karl clearly cannot deal with hearing that Valda's baby might not be his, and even though Garvey isn't insinuating anything and doesn't understand the import of his words, Karl can't cope with having his masculinity attacked. The scene—the first murder to take place and the most shocking—expresses the fragility of masculinity and its investment in familial reproduction.

Such a critique of toxic masculinity is at least implicitly feminist, but more striking from a gender perspective is the film's ability to dismantle the perversity of the heterosexual family without reliance on the violence of women. Thus, Karl literally kills the messenger here, demonstrating that what's important is that nobody (no other men) question his status, rather than caring whether or not he actually is the father. At no point does the film imperil Valda herself, and her body is not made into a symbol of the stakes of patriarchal violence. Indeed, across the film, violence is strikingly not gendered. Two women are killed—Pringle's mother and Maggie—but neither is killed for being a woman, and neither murder is represented in a sexualised way. The most narratively significant act of violence against a woman is the murder of matriarch Maggie, and she is killed by Valda, herself a heavily pregnant woman. Despite the centrality of familial violence to the film's narrative system, gender is not the primary way that power is distributed.

If we turn from human relationships to the environments in which they take place, we can see the film's uncomfortable affects as a result of a carefully elaborated relationship between these violent narrative actions and their setting in apparently quotidian spaces. The film is set—and shot—in the southern English coastal city of Brighton. Its specific location might not seem to matter all that much since we spend

much of our time indoors, in the family home, but location seeps into the film in subtle yet significant ways. One of the city's key cinematic reference points is *Brighton Rock*, Graham Greene's seminal British gangster novel filmed in 1947 by the Boulting brothers and remade in 2010 by Rowan Joffé. Both films represent the city in terms of working-class spaces and the dangerous underbelly of a seaside town's amusement arcades and pier. Meanwhile, to a contemporary British audience, Brighton conjures most readily a beach destination, a laid-back party town whose seedy working-class past has been largely superceded by a new cultural cliché of hippies and latte-sipping environmentalists. Wheatley doesn't give us either of these visions of Brighton. We see little of the urban landscape traversed by Greene's Pinky, and only one scene in the entire film is set on the beach. Instead of reiterating these well-worn representations, the film switches back and forth between the titular space of the family's terraced house and the more expansive exteriors of the green fields and uplands of the South Downs.

John David Rhodes and Elena Gorfinkel suggest that 'The theorizations of cinema and place are replete with the tensions between ontology and codedness', the material force of profilmic space experienced alongside the fictive constructions of narrative space.⁴ They point out how cinema and (real-world) space are doubled in similar ways, both often understood to be natural while in fact socially constructed.⁵ Across his films, Wheatley trades on this doubleness—deploying the documentary qualities of English locations to unexpected ends. One way of animating this tension might be the artificial binary of realism and spectacle, in which the spaces of the British realist drama appear to exist in a different dimension from the spaces of the genre film. The work of location in *Down Terrace* is to create the cognitive confusion that results when an environment that the spectator reads as operating to authenticate

a real place and time flips modality to become the setting for spectacular genre action. Both the domestic interiors of the titular terraced house and the film's landscape sequences offer this kind of destabilising effect, seeming at first to speak in the vernaculars of British realism before overthrowing those expectations of place and space with the actions of the perverse family.

So where is Down Terrace? It's a real street, in a residential part of Brighton that is more or less equidistant from the beach and the city centre. Its terraced houses provide a particular English setting: it's far from the McMansion plenitude of an Americanized suburb, but equally distant from the high-rise density of a big city. The neighbourhood is neither deprived nor wealthy, and thus as a film location, it refuses some dominant tropes of the gangster film. It neither offers images of gangster bling, nor does it stage a seedy underworld of East End London dive bars, boxing clubs or back alleys. Instead, we are mostly confined to a shabby terraced house whose ordinary qualities seem to resist the extreme acts that take place in it. It's big enough for Karl to live in with his parents and for Maggie to suggest that Valda move in, but it is not detached which means neighbours could potentially hear the murders that eventually transpire. The film uses *mise-en-scène* to create the sense of scale and proximity that ensures the violence feels, literally, out of place. The house's small rooms are made more cramped by camerawork that eschews any wide angle shots to keep characters hemmed in. The upstairs rooms are piled high with books and dvds, goods to be sold on eBay in a cottage industry that does not suggest high-stakes crime. The effect of all these people and objects is claustrophobic rather than cosy. When Karl plays a guitar in his bedroom upstairs, his father shouts up at him, demanding he 'learn some chords.' Even when walls separate the family, sound

carries and no activity can take place without the potential for aggression. As the narrative progresses, this ordinary space feels more and more dangerous.

The threat does not dissipate, however, when we leave the confines of the home and move into the open spaces of the South Downs. Andrew Higson has pointed to a shot that recurs in British realist films in which urban working-class characters escape their everyday environments and look down on the city. Already a cliché in the 1960s, it was named by one commentator as ‘That Long Shot of Our Town from That Hill’.⁶ *Down Terrace* includes one such shot, but, like the scene on the beach, this apparent semiotic familiarity leads the spectator down the garden path: these are not images of temporary reprieve. Instead, Wheatley uses the countryside in a way that will become more sustained in *Sightseers*—whenever characters escape into rural space, it rapidly turns into a site for murderous violence. First, Karl and associate Eric drive into the country to bury Garvey’s body, then the hitman is shot in a field, Karl gets knifed, only to overpower and kill his attacker, and finally Maggie is stabbed to death in front of a horse. This final example emphasises the simultaneously comedic and grotesque experience of rurality in the film. The scene crosscuts between Karl killing his father in the family house and Valda killing Maggie by a field. The country scene begins with a horse visible in a paddock, out of focus, in the background. As it proceeds, we cut into close-ups of Valda attacking Maggie, the knife entering her body, Valda’s face smeared in blood, Maggie’s open mouth, but among these kinetic shots of the killing, we cut out to an extreme close up of the horse’s eyes, and then a medium shot of the horse, eyeline match implying that she is watching the murder. When Karl shoots his father back in the house, the next shot is the horse startling and running away, as if she is responding to the gunshot. Domestic and rural spaces are bound together virtually in this climactic scene of violence, and

the humorous Kuleshov effect of the equine witness forcefully demonstrates the film's transformation of nature from realist ontology into generic code.

This use of spaces offers more than the surprise effect of overturning expectations. Wheatley's films are always deeply embedded in particular English locations, drawing on the cultural histories of place as well as the cinematic associations that audiences bring to them. *Down Terrace* avoids the clichés of Brighton but the film could not have been shot anywhere else. Bill's ridiculous disquisition on Timothy Leary evokes the city's association both with hippy philosophies and with present-day drug culture. The sequence of Karl and Valda on the beach seems like a romantic escape from familial violence but the spectator realises in retrospect that it must have been the moment when they planned to murder Karl's parents. Most of all, *Down Terrace*'s cross-cutting between domestic and green spaces is rooted in the social geography of its location. Brighton is bordered on one side by the English Channel and almost entirely surrounded on the other by the South Downs national park. It has little suburban sprawl but rather a sharp distinction between built environment and non-human nature. *Down Terrace* uses this geography to construct a perverse ecosystem in which domestic space houses the (twisted and constrained) life of the psychotic family romance and where the apparently liberatory spaces of the surrounding landscape provide only the opportunity for violent death.

(2979 words)

Contact details:
Rosalind Galt
27 Sudeley Place
Brighton
BN2 1HF
UK

Rosalind.galt@kcl.ac.uk
(+44) 780-777-1135

Bio:

Rosalind Galt is Professor of Film Studies at King's College London. Her publications include *The New European Cinema: Redrawing the Map* (Columbia UP, 2006), *Pretty: Film and the Decorative Image* (Columbia UP, 2011), and *Queer Cinema in the World*, co-authored with Karl Schoonover (Duke UP, forthcoming 2016).

Abstract:

Ben Wheatley's first feature, *Down Terrace*, uses the doubled qualities of place to destabilise audience expectations, shifting from an apparent deployment of British social realism into a more spectacular register of violent genre action. This article begins from the film's representation of family and domestic space, within which the sentimental qualities of the gangster family are overthrown in favour of a more perverse account of generational succession. It links the film's account of the Southern English coastal city of Brighton to Wheatley's other explorations of specific English places and landscapes. Brighton as a location evokes histories of the British crime film, but it also provides a close proximity of urban and rural spaces which the film deploys as a way to structure the uneasy affects of its familial violence.

¹ Sigmund Freud, 'Family Romances', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume IX (1906-1908): Jensen's 'Gradiva' and Other Works*, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1959), 236.

² Ibid, 237.

³ David Cox, 'Laughing Screaming', *Film Comment*, 48:1 (2012), 65.

⁴ John David Rhodes and Elena Gorfinkel, 'Introduction: the Matter of Places,' in *Taking Place: Location and the Moving Image* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), x.

⁵ *ibid*, x.

⁶ Andrew Higson, 'Space, Place, Spectacle: Landscape and Townscape in the 'Kitchen Sink' Film,' *Screen*, 25:4-5 (1984), 2-3.